

Police CAMERA Act can help eliminate excessive force | Opinion

The Police Creating Accountability by Making Effective Recording Available (CAMERA) Act would institute standards regarding the use of body cameras and the collection of recorded data.

By Steve Cohen, Guest columnist

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The act would establish a pilot grant program to provide state and local governments with funds to purchase body cameras and institute standards regarding the use of body cameras and the collection of recorded data.

The vast majority of law enforcement officers are dedicated public servants, but some act outside of the law and erode the public trust.

Previously unreleased video of the traffic stop that resulted in the arrest and subsequent death of Sandra Bland was recently made available to the public. This video, which Bland recorded on her cellphone, raises questions about her case and returns attention to the greater problem of police misconduct.

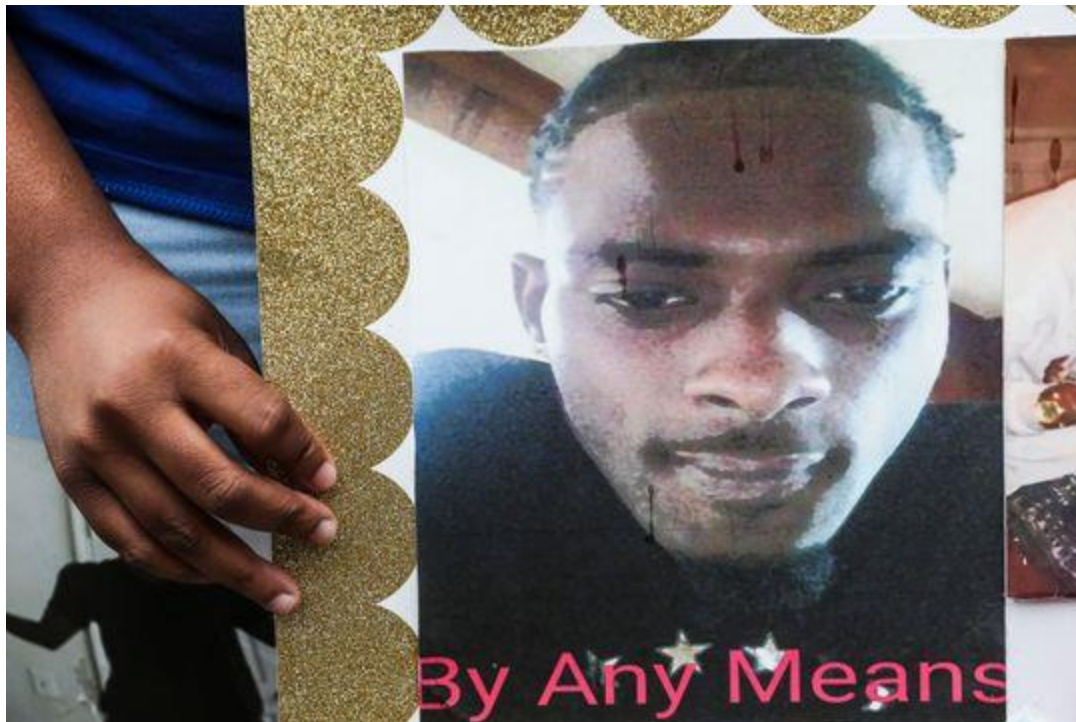
A newly released video recorded by Sandra Bland, a black woman found dead in a Texas jailhouse three days after a confrontational traffic stop by a white state trooper in 2015, is raising new questions about an incident that helped launch the Black Lives Matter movement. USA TODAY

Immediately following Bland's death, only the police dashcam footage was released. This showed officer Brian Encinia forcibly removing Bland from her car.

He claimed he was acting out of concern for his safety, fearing that Bland might retaliate or reach for a weapon. The fact that Bland was filming their interaction undermines this claim.

Cellphone footage of police violence has helped awaken the American people to the problem of excessive and deadly force. It has also increased public demands for transparency and accountability. But justice should not depend on whether a bystander or victim captures bad acts on video.

If Encinia had been wearing a body camera, the reality of the situation would have been immediately apparent and the outcome of the investigation into his actions might have been different. The Bland family might have found justice.



Jerricka Banks, Martavious Banks' younger sister, holds a sign with Martavious' photo after marching to the Memphis Police Association to demand answers about his shooting Sept. 26, 2018. (Photo: Brad Vest/The Commercial Appeal)

However, body cameras cannot solve this problem if they aren't properly utilized. We saw this following the [tragic shooting of Martavious Banks](#) here in Memphis, where all three officers involved broke procedure and deactivated their cameras.

It is important we combine the use of body cameras with policies that provide clear expectations on the use of the devices and how to handle the recorded data, and require officers to justify their failure to use the body cameras. Police body cameras, when used properly, can help provide evidence, restore trust between the police and the communities they serve, and ensure accountability.



Jeanette Williams places a bouquet of roses at a memorial for Sandra Bland near Prairie View A&M University in Prairie View, Texas, on July 21, 2015. A state investigation of a white state trooper's actions in the arrest of Bland, a black motorist who later died in custody, found that the trooper, Brian Encinia, was rude toward Bland and failed to follow standard procedures in his handling of the woman. (Photo: Pat Sullivan, AP)

That's why I am proud to sponsor the Police Creating Accountability by Making Effective Recording Available (CAMERA) Act, which would establish a pilot grant program to provide state and local governments with funds to purchase body cameras and institute standards regarding the use of body cameras and the collection of recorded data.

Increased footage of police interactions, both positive and negative, will aid in developing accountability and expose the strengths and weaknesses of protocols and training, which can help guide reforms.

It's time for Congress to address the issue of police violence. I'm advocating for the Police CAMERA Act as a step toward eliminating the excessive and, all too often, fatal use of force.

Rep. Steve Cohen, D-Memphis, represents the 9th Congressional District of Tennessee in the U.S. House of Representatives and is a senior member of the House Committee on the Judiciary.